

By Norm Trainor

Teamwork: co-ordination and co-operation

Sales at Robin's firm were down and the problem seemed to be that employees weren't working together

The following is based on one of The Covenant Group's clients, Robin Froner. All of the names and telling details have been changed to preserve client privacy.

Since hiring a number of specialists, Robin Froner had seen tremendous growth in her business. She prided herself on hiring talented, hard workers, people who could easily earn the trust of her clients. Robin believed she could build a strong team by simply hiring good people. Unfortunately, she was mistaken, and her business was suffering.

When quarterly results came in a few months ago, Robin was alarmed. Her growth strategy depended on a high percentage of multiple sales, which had been growing over the previous two quarters. But now there was an alarming drop off. Without multiple sales, she'd miss revenue targets, and worse, she'd be opening up her client base to competition.

The quarterly results pointed to a problem with Sandy, her benefits specialist, and Chris, her disability specialist. Both had been selling, but rarely to the same clients. Lack of teamwork was something she'd been sensing for a while, so she called on Herb Koplowitz, our VP of Organization Effectiveness Services.

Robin explained to Herb that she had some terrific people working for her, but they just seemed unable to work together as a team.

Robin explained the problem with Chris and Sandy: "They both know about our multiple sales strategy, and at first, they'd always bring each other in on clients, but that's stopped." Chris says Sandy simply won't bring him in to any more clients. When he asked Sandy why, she was so rude to him that he stopped asking altogether. He's happier making his own sales, and not dealing with Sandy. As for Sandy, she says it's not worth her time to bring Chris in. According to Sandy, Chris understands disability, but not how it fits with her clients, their corporate strategy, and their recruitment plans. Consequently Chris is awkward in sales meetings, constantly saying the wrong thing. Sandy doesn't want to jeopardize her client relationships and she doesn't have the time to train Chris.

This clearly was a teamwork issue, but Herb was beginning to believe that the real problem was that Robin placed the blame with Chris and Sandy, rather than with herself as their manager. Herb needed to probe further.

Herb asked Robin how she'd handled Chris and Sandy so far. Robin replied, "Mostly, I tell them that they're grown ups and that I've empowered them and that they should be able to work this out on their own and to stop complaining to me. But I think Sandy's just not a team player. Chris isn't the only one who's complained to me about Sandy's rudeness. I'm thinking of bringing in a team-building consultant. Maybe if they all understood each others' personality

types and had some fun experiences together they'd understand and like each other better."

Herb's suspicions were confirmed. But more disturbing, was the trap Robin had fallen into: the belief that personality types has something to do with good teamwork.

Herb asked Robin how she'd like her people to work together better. Robin thought for a moment then replied, "I guess I'd like see my people working together without undue friction, getting along with each other, all of them working in a way that benefits the others' work."

"I like your answer," Herb replied. "That's what good teamwork is. If you'd let me rephrase it for you, teamwork is about coordination and cooperation." Robin agreed. Herb said, "People liking each other or understanding each other doesn't have much impact on coordination and cooperation. Personally, I wouldn't want my manager doing some test of my personality, and I certainly wouldn't want the results shared with other staff members; so I wouldn't recommend that you do that. I figure it's my own business whether I'm an introvert or an extrovert; the only question that matters is whether I do my job.

"As for teambuilding activities, let me ask you. As I recall, you played on the university basketball team. Did your coach ever take the team on a team building weekend?" "No," said Robin. "Your coach developed team work by putting

you through drills,” Herb said. Robin nodded.

“I’m not saying you need to run drills in your office,” Herb said, “but you do need to communicate the patterns you expect everyone to work to. That means telling Sandy explicitly to bring Chris in on every client, if that’s what you want. Have you told Sandy what your team work expectations are?” “No,” replied Robin, “I guess I thought it was obvious and, in retrospect, I guess I was wrong.”

Herb continued, “As with all task setting, you need to set context for Sandy. Apparently, Sandy already has the context of your agency’s strategy and the importance of multiple products per client. But there may be less clarity about the importance of building a referral process, and Sandy may need your help in finding smoother and quicker ways of bringing Chris into clients.”

“But Sandy’s going to resent bringing Chris in, and I don’t want to force a teamwork that won’t work.”

“As with any task assigning, you need to get Sandy’s input, her impression of whether this can work and whether there’s a better way. But in the end, you are the boss, and you have a better understanding of strategy than Sandy does.”

“What about Sandy’s rudeness?” asked Robin. “This comes under ‘cooperation’. Sandy is not being cooperative, and several people in your agency are suffering from it. You need to set clear standards and hold Sandy to them. This might include issues like what things people in the agency can expect others to do for them – and what not. And issues of politeness: you can start with the general, ‘be polite’, and if Sandy doesn’t understand what ‘polite’ means, you can get more specific.

Eventually, this may come down to determining whether Sandy doesn’t know how to be polite, or doesn’t want to. For the time being, though, I’d say you’re remiss in allowing Sandy to be rude to others in the office. It’s up to you to ensure that there’s a civil atmosphere in the office.”

“Isn’t there a simpler way?” Robin asked, “I’ve been talking with Lee, who runs a property and casualty business, about forming a strategic alliance. Lee has a couple of sales associates who look after home and auto insurance, and they’re paid a group bonus to encourage teamwork between them. They both get a bonus when the home and auto business is good.” Herb replied, “In my experience, you’ll find good teamwork in an agency that uses group bonuses if there was good teamwork before the bonuses were brought in. But if there is any potential for conflict, group bonuses won’t prevent it. The idea of a group bonus is that it encourages hard workers to work harder and puts pressure on those who don’t work so hard. But think about it. First, the issue isn’t always how hard someone works. Sandy is a hard worker, but is torn between two priorities *you* have set: make sales and help Chris make sales. Only you can clarify the priorities. Second, it’s up to you to determine whether slacking off is the issue and then to deal with it. Staff members rightly resent being told to work harder by someone who’s not their boss. And hard working staff members rightly resent having to mind other staff members who aren’t their subordinates. Finally, your contract is with each staff member as an individual. To be fair, you need to compensate each one for what they contribute to your strategy. Otherwise, hard workers

will rightly feel they’re being taken advantage of by others who don’t work as hard but who receive the same bonus.”

Lessons learned

After her session with Herb, Robin remarked, “It seems that it’s up to me to get the teamwork I want by being a good manager.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Herb. Teamwork isn’t about throwing good people in a room together and crossing your fingers. It’s about setting up processes and work patterns, and showing people how to work according to those processes and patterns. Trying to get people to work harder when they don’t know what work they should be doing is fruitless. When your team isn’t working the way you want it to, look inside. You, as manager, are responsible.

Fortunately, Robin was able to take control of her team. By implementing clear work patterns – coordination -- and by working with Sandy on her rudeness – cooperation – Robin was able to get her business back on track. In fact, the next quarter’s results showed that multiple sales had exceeded expectations.

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